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ABSTRACT

This digest presents a description of three innovative interventions designed to support student literacy acquisition outside the classroom in low resource communities. It begins with a discussion of literacy related issues in low resource environments, noting that an increasing number of children who are not acquiring a basic education live in impoverished sections of industrialized nations. The first program described in the Digest is a Nigerian grassroots initiative where reading clubs were conducted by a local organization called The Center of Excellence for Literacy and Literacy Education. The second program described in the digest is "The Talk to a Literacy Learner" program, which assists parents in their children's reading and writing, and which began in an urban elementary school in Sydney, Australia. The last program described involved elementary and middle school students in the Des Moines, Iowa area in long-term after school sports and recreational programs; summer camps designed to increase students' reading, writing, math, and science literacy; field trips; job shadowing; and mentoring programs. It concludes that involving students in out-of-school based literacy activities that connect them with their communities and enrich their day-to-day lives can play a key role in literacy skills acquisition in school. (RS)

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Literacy Interventions in Low Resource Environments: An International Perspective

by Manjari Singh

While much attention is currently being focused on classroom-based practices that increase literacy acquisition, many supportive literacy initiatives continue to be implemented outside the classroom. Given the presence of similar contextual elements in most low resource educational environments, examining interventions that support students' literacy in different parts of the world can illuminate common issues and provide relevant insights. This digest presents a description of three innovative interventions designed to support student literacy acquisition outside the classroom in low resource communities.

Literacy related issues in low resource environments

Article 1 of *The World Declaration on Education for All* (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990), reaffirmed the global community's commitment to provide an education where:

> Every person—child, youth, adult—shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. These needs comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning. The scope of basic learning needs and how they should be met varies with individual countries and cultures, and inevitably, changes with the passage of time. (p. 3)

The commitment to ensuring literacy for all was reiterated by countries at international meetings throughout the 1990's, and again at the World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000. Yet, it is currently estimated that about twenty percent of world's population aged fifteen and above is illiterate and that about 115.4 million school-age children are not in school (UNESCO, 2002). Besides non-school enrollment by millions of children, two other issues of concern are school drop-out and completion of school without acquiring functional literacy (Lievesley and Motivans, 2000).

While the majority of children who are not acquiring a basic education live in developing countries, it is a matter of increasing concern that a significant number of these children and youth live in impoverished sections of industrialized nations (International Institute for Educational Planning, 1997). In a comparison of child poverty in twenty-three of the worlds richest countries (comprising the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development or the OECD), Adamson, Micklewright, and Wright (2000) found child poverty rates to range from under 3% to more than 25% and that approximately one in six children live in poverty.

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In a recent Innocenti Report (UNICEF, 2000), it was found that in OECD nations children's educational achievement is strongly linked to the "occupation, education, and economic status" of their parents (p. 2); that non-native children tended to be particularly disadvantaged in some countries (p. 17); and children of less educated mothers tended to have lower reading levels (p. 22). Also, in many developing countries and low resource educational settings in the industrialized world, the language of school-based instruction is not the same as the language students speak at home.

Irrespective of geographical region, schools located in poor communities and characterized by low levels of children's academic achievement have certain common features. As stated in the U.S. Department of Education's 1998 report on *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools*, "many low-performing schools are located in impoverished communities where family distress, crime, and violence are prevalent" (Executive Summary section, ¶ 2). Also, educational contexts characterized by low levels of student literacy present high-stress teaching-learning environments as they are often crowded, have poor quality school facilities, lack well qualified teachers, and have teachers and administrators who have low expectations of students. Thus, children living in poverty tend to go to schools that are poorly resourced and receive a poor-quality education that does not help them break free of their disadvantaged backgrounds.

In order to support disadvantaged children's academic success in school, communities around the world have adopted a variety of creative and effective literacy interventions. A profile of a few such interventions is presented below.

Reading Clubs in Nigeria

Informal initiatives that support literacy in the language of instruction in schools by making relevant and interesting reading materials accessible to community members offer a valuable resource that supplements the formal educational system. One important example is Onukaogu's (1999) description of a Nigerian grassroots initiative where reading clubs were conducted by a local organization called *The Center of Excellence for Literacy and Literacy Education (CELLE)*. Based on student and community interest in acquiring literacy in English, school teachers and university faculty functioned as facilitators to provide opportunities for literacy empowerment of primary school-age children, newly literate adults, as well as adults from secondary schools and universities who were already mature readers. The goal of the reading clubs was not only to foster language skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking, but to provide opportunities for critical thinking, questioning, and building self-esteem through group-based reading-writing activities. While facilitators offered each group options in reading, writing and activities according to their interests, they also facilitated critical literacy and supported family literacy activities between parents and children (Onukaogu, 1999).

Involving Parents in Children's Literacy in Australia

Another interesting example of a supportive literacy intervention program described by Cairney and Munsie (1995) is *The Talk to a Literacy Learner (TTALL)*, which was implemented in an elementary school located in an urban suburb of Sydney, Australia where the local community was characterized by a low level of educational participation, high levels of crime and unemployment, problems with drug use, and also high levels of family breakdown. In their article, the authors demonstrate TTALL's effectiveness in making meaningful connections between schools and parents in a troubled, low resource setting. (This program was also implemented in a hundred other schools in New South Wales).

The goal of TTALL was to engage and assist parents in their children's reading and writing, and it was implemented in three stages. In phase I parents who were interested in interacting more effectively in their children's literacy acquisition process were identified and trained. In phase II these parents were trained to be literacy tutors in the school, and then in Phase III to become community tutors who would introduce other parents to TTALL strategies in their own homes. In describing program outcomes at the end of the initial year-long implementation phase, Cairney and Munsie found qualitative gains in children's literacy levels. Children not only reported finding school work less difficult, but were also observed to select and read a range of materials at higher reading levels and to have increased their confidence in themselves as readers and writers. They also observed notable outcomes among the parents, who had not only developed a repertoire of effective strategies to assist their children's literacy development, but who felt more confident, and had begun to take a greater level of interest in the school and its activities.

In a more recent Australian study, Lawson (2000) explained how parental involvement in literacy could be further improved by going beyond the kind of initiative described by Cairney and Munsie. Lawson recommends recognizing parental insights about literacy that may be very different from those proposed within schools and recognizing the need to learn from families who may see home-based literacy practices as being distinct from school based literacy. She suggests that rather than developing literacy support programs that use a common script both in the school and home, home-school relationships can be "mutually supportive" and "harmonious" (p. 4) if they build on the different elements of literacy practiced in the home and the school.

Protecting children from failure through out-of-school programs in the United States

While the Australian initiative described above built on parent knowledge and interest in children's literacy, Query and Hausafus (1998) report on a program developed to shield elementary and middle school students from factors that contribute to school failure and to assist them in improving their academic performance. This long term project conducted in a low income area of Des Moines, Iowa was implemented over approximately two years, and involved 507 students in: long-term after school sports and recreational programs; summer camps designed to increase students reading, writing, math, and science literacy; field trips; job shadowing opportunities for middle school students; and mentoring programs where students developed a long-term relationship with a caring adult. During implementation, both qualitative data (in the form of observation forms, journals, teacher and parent surveys) and quantitative data (in the form of grades on student report cards) was collected on participants. In a case study of nine participating elementary students, records maintained over the two years indicated their academic achievement levels had improved. Mentors and tutors identified improvements in student behavior and attitudes as well as in their social skills, self-esteem and problem solving. It was also noted that during the course of interventions, students had developed a close and supportive relationship with a peer, a caring adult, as well as some community members. These positive changes occurred along with a reduction in the number of times students had been in trouble in school and at home.

Conclusion

As the above examples indicate, involving students in out-of-school based literacy activities that connect them with their communities and enrich their day-to-day lives can play a key role in literacy skills acquisition in school. While contextual factors always need to be taken into account in designing and implementing interventions to develop children's literacy skills, insights obtained from projects across the world can be used to enrich local implementation.

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